No. 15-648

Supreme Court, U.S.
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In The

Supreme Court of the United States

V. L., PETITIONER

v.

E. L. AND TOBIE J. SMITH,
GUARDIAN AD LITEM

ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE SUPREME COURT OF ALABAMA

RESPONSE OF TOBIE J. SMITH, GUARDIAN AD LITEM, IN SUPPORT OF PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTION PRESENTED

Does the Full Faith and Credit Clause permit a court to deny recognition to an adoption judgment previously issued by a court from a sister State, based on the forum court's *de novo* determination that the issuing court erred in applying its own State's adoption law?

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BRIEF FOR TOBIE J. SMITH, GUARDIAN AD LITEM, IN SUPPORT OF GRANTING THE PETITION

Respondent Tobie J. Smith, the duly appointed Guardian Ad Litem for the three minor children in this case, respectfully submits this brief in support of granting the petition.[1]

INTRODUCTION

This case involves a question of federal law that is of exceptional importance to families that have been bound together through a second-parent adoption: whether their second-parent adoption judgment will be given full faith and credit throughout the Nation. A second-parent adoption is an adoption in which a person adopts his or her unmarried partner's child without terminating the first parent's parental rights. Families across the Nation have obtained such adoption judgments and have relied on the legal stability that those court orders have provided their families. The decision of the Supreme Court of Alabama dramatically undermines that stability, declaring null and void adoptions issued years earlier by another State's courts. As the dissenting Justice explained, the decision "creates a dangerous precedent that calls into question the finality of adoptions in Alabama." Pet. App. 35a.

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[1] Within 20 days after this case was placed on the docket, counsel of record for all parties received notice of Mr. Smith's intent to file this brief. *See* S. Ct. R. 12.6.

In this case, three children—S. L., N. L., and H. L., who range in age from eleven to thirteen—are caught up in a custody dispute between their parents, V. L. and E. L. V. L. and E. L. are two women who were in a committed relationship for nearly seventeen years. E. L. gave birth to all three children, but both E. L. and V. L. are their parents, both having fully participated in caring for and rearing the children since birth.

In 2007, with E. L.'s participation and full consent, the Superior Court of Fulton County, Georgia, granted V. L.'s petition to adopt the children as a second parent, finding that the adoption was in the children's best interests. Under that judgment, V. L. should have full parental rights. Indeed, in Georgia she still does, as there is no question that Georgia courts would give effect to V. L.'s adoption judgment. Under the Full Faith and Credit Clause, it was therefore mandatory for the Alabama courts to do the same.

The Supreme Court of Alabama, however, refused to honor the Georgia court's judgment, concluding that the Georgia court lacked subject-matter jurisdiction. The Alabama court recognized that the Georgia court had "subject-matter jurisdiction over, that is, the power to rule on, adoption petitions." Pet. App. 19a. Nevertheless, the Alabama court conducted its "own analysis of the Georgia adoption statutes" and ruled that those statutes do not provide for second-parent adoptions. Pet. App. 22a. From that, the Alabama court held that the Georgia Superior Court

lacked subject-matter jurisdiction to issue the adoption judgment.

But, as the dissenting Justice explained, those Georgia statutes "speak to the *merits* of whether the adoption should be granted—not to whether the trial court obtains subject-matter jurisdiction." Pet. App. 32a. Under the Alabama court's decision, "[a]ny irregularity in a probate court's decision in an adoption would now arguably create a defect in that court's subject-matter jurisdiction." Pet. App. 35a. The Alabama decision thus calls into question the validity of all manner of out-of-state adoptions.

The issue has grave importance, both in this case and beyond. The decision creates an intolerable situation for families who obtained second-parent adoptions in other States and who have counted on those judgments' being given full faith and credit in States such as Alabama. The Alabama Supreme Court's decision effectively declares for S. L., N. L., and H. L. that the woman whom they have known since birth as their mother, and who adopted them with the full consent of their biological mother, is actually a stranger to them. The Alabama court so ruled even though the biological mother, E. L., has never so much as suggested—not even in the trial court, where such arguments would have been properly presented—that V. L. is unfit or that preserving the children's legal relationship with V. L. is not in their best interests. Other families are also at risk of having their foundational relationships declared void if they move or travel into Alabama.

These unbearable circumstances are antithetical to the Constitution's guarantee of full faith and credit. This Court's review is urgently needed.

STATEMENT

A. Factual Background

V. L. and E. L. were in a committed relationship for nearly seventeen years, beginning in 1995. Pet. App. 1a. In 2002 and 2004, E. L. gave birth to three children conceived through assisted-reproductive technology. Pet. App. 1a-2a. From the beginning of the children's lives, V. L. and E. L. both have been their parents.

In 2007, E. L. and V. L. decided to formalize V. L.'s parental role and obtain legal protection for her as a parent. Pet. App. 2a-3a. To that end, with E. L.'s consent, V. L. petitioned the Superior Court of Fulton County, Georgia, for a judgment of adoption. Pet. App. 3a. The court noted that E. L. consented to the adoption and desired that the requested adoption would "have the legal result that [V. L.] and [the children] will also have a legal parent-child relationship with legal rights and responsibilities equal to mine through establishment of their legal relationship by adoption." Pet. App. 3a.

After a home visit, Pet. App. 2a-3a, the Georgia court found by "clear and convincing evidence that [V. L.] has functioned as an equal second parent to the children, since their birth," and that "[t]he children relate to both their legal mother and [V. L.] as

parents on an equal basis." Pet. App. 49a. The court found that the "adoption is in the best interests of the children. It would be inconsistent with the reality of this parenting arrangement to either terminate the rights of the sole legal parent or to deny the adoption by the second parent, which is with the express consent of the legal parent." Pet. App. 50a.

The court thus granted the adoption, concluding that the "evidence is clear and convincing that the adoption is in the children's best interest." *Ibid.* The court explained that the "children should have the legal benefits and protections of both their parents which will accrue as a result of their adoption." *Ibid.*

Specifically addressing the fact that this was a second-parent adoption, the court determined that it could issue the adoption judgment even without terminating E. L.'s parental rights. The court explained that it "would be contrary to the children's best interest and would adversely impact their right to care, support and inheritance and would adversely affect their sense of security and well-being to either deny this adoption by the second parent or to terminate the rights of the legal and biological mother." *Ibid.* The court thus ordered "that the parent-child relationship between the legal mother, [E. L.], and the children is hereby preserved intact and that [V. L.] shall be recognized as the second parent." Pet. App. 51a.

New birth certificates were issued, listing V. L. as a parent. Pet. App. 3a.

The relationship between E. L. and V. L. ended in November 2011. Pet. App. 4a.

B. Proceedings In The Alabama Courts

1. Jefferson Family Court

In 2013, V. L. sought to secure her parental rights after E. L. interfered with V. L.'s exercise of those rights and denied access to the children. *Ibid.* V. L. filed a petition in Alabama seeking registration of the Georgia judgment of adoption, a declaration of her legal rights pursuant to that judgment, and an award of joint custody and/or visitation. *Ibid.* The Jefferson Family Court awarded V. L. scheduled visitation. *Ibid.*

2. Alabama Court of Civil Appeals

E. L. appealed to the Alabama Court of Civil Appeals. That court initially reversed the Family Court's order, but it later granted rehearing, reversed itself, and held that the Georgia adoption is entitled to full faith and credit. Pet. App. 4a-5a. The court concluded that, based on its "independent review of the Georgia Adoption Code," Georgia law does not permit second-parent adoptions. Pet. App. 45a. But it nevertheless held that the adoption judgment must be recognized in Alabama: "Although it may be that the Georgia court erroneously construed Georgia law so as to permit V.L. to adopt the children as a 'second parent,' that error goes to the merits of the case and not to the subject-matter jurisdiction of the Georgia court." *Ibid.*

3. Supreme Court of Alabama

The Supreme Court of Alabama reversed, refusing to accord full faith and credit to the Georgia adoption decree. The court acknowledged that its review of the legal issues in the case "does not extend to a review of the legal merits of the Georgia judgment, because we are prohibited from making any inquiry into the merits of the Georgia judgment by Art. IV, § 1, of the United States Constitution," *i.e.*, the Full Faith and Credit Clause. Pet. App. 6a. Nevertheless, the court proceeded to review the merits of the Georgia adoption judgment, under the guise of reviewing the Georgia court's subject-matter jurisdiction to issue the judgment—even while expressly acknowledging that the Georgia court had "subject-matter jurisdiction over, that is, the power to rule on, adoption petitions." Pet. App. 19a.

The Alabama court *de novo* conducted its "own analysis of the Georgia adoption statutes" and decided that the Georgia court should not have granted V. L.'s adoption petition because, in its view, Georgia law does not provide "for a non-spouse to adopt a child without first terminating the parental rights of the current parents." Pet. App. 22a. Having determined that the Georgia court misapplied Georgia law, the Alabama court concluded that the error went to the Georgia court's subject-matter jurisdiction. Pet. App. 23a-24a. The Alabama court cited a decision from the intermediate appellate court in Georgia stating that the "requirements of Georgia's adoption

statutes are mandatory and must be strictly construed in favor of the natural parents." *Ibid.* (quoting *In re Marks*, 684 S.E.2d 364, 367 (Ga. Ct. App. 2009)). From that single statement, the Alabama court concluded that a defect in application of the Georgia adoption statutes in a particular case necessarily means that the Georgia court was "not empowered" to issue an adoption decree in that case. Pet. App. 24a.

The Alabama court also rejected application of Georgia's statute of repose for adoptions, under which Georgia courts will enforce a Georgia adoption judgment even if there was no subject-matter jurisdiction to issue it. Pet. App. 12a. The statute of repose provides that "[a] decree of adoption issued pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not be subject to any judicial challenge filed more than six months after the date of entry of such decree." Ga. Code Ann. § 19-8-18(e). The Alabama court acknowledged that Georgia courts have held that after six months, the statute of repose precludes even jurisdictional challenges to adoptions. Pet. App. 12a (citing *Williams v. Williams*, 717 S.E.2d 553, 553-54 (Ga. Ct. App. 2011)). The policy underlying the statute of repose is that normal jurisdictional principles "'must yield to competing principles that derive from the compelling public interest in the finality and certainty of judgments, an interest that is especially compelling with respect to judgments affecting familial relations.'" Pet. App. 13a-14a (quoting *Bates v. Bates*, 730 S.E.2d 482, 483 (Ga. Ct. App. 2012) (citation omitted)). But, relying on its own analysis of the

Georgia statutes and a dissent from the denial of a certiorari petition to the Supreme Court of Georgia in a case in which the lower court refused to set aside an adoption decree, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that the statute of repose applies only where the statutory requirements are already met. Pet. App. 15a-17a.

The Supreme Court of Alabama therefore declared that the "Georgia judgment is accordingly void, and the full faith and credit clause does not require the courts of Alabama to recognize that judgment." Pet. App. 24a.

Justice Parker specially concurred. Pet. App. 26a-31a. He wrote that under *Alabama* law, adoption "is a privilege," that "there is no fundamental right to adopt," and that "having created the purely statutory right of adoption, the State has the authority to specify the contours of that right." Pet. App. 26a-27a. In his view, because "adoption is a purely statutory right created by the State acting as *parens patriae*," Alabama "has a legitimate interest in encouraging that children be adopted into the optimal family structure, i.e., one with both a father and a mother." Pet. App. 31a.

Justice Shaw dissented. Pet. App. 31a-35a. He wrote that the statutory requirements to which the majority pointed "speak to the *merits* of whether the adoption should be granted—not to whether the trial court obtains subject-matter jurisdiction." Pet. App. 32a. He explained that "[j]urisdiction is instead provided by Georgia Code Ann., § 19-8-2(a), which

states that the superior courts of Georgia have jurisdiction 'in *all matters* of adoption.'" *Ibid.* (emphasis by Justice Shaw). Moreover, the Supreme Court of Georgia has defined "subject-matter jurisdiction" as jurisdiction over the "class of cases" to which any particular case belongs. *Ibid.* (quoting *Abushmais v. Erby*, 652 S.E.2d 549, 550 (Ga. 2007)). In Justice Shaw's view, "[t]he adoption petition in the instant case, whether meritorious or not, was part of the class of cases within the Georgia court's jurisdiction to decide." *Ibid.* Finally, Justice Shaw expressed his "fear that this case creates a dangerous precedent that calls into question the finality of adoptions in Alabama: Any irregularity in a probate court's decision in an adoption would now arguably create a defect in that court's subject-matter jurisdiction." Pet. App. 35a.

REASONS THE PETITION SHOULD BE GRANTED

A. The Alabama Supreme Court's Decision Subjects Families To Conflicting State-Court Judgments Concerning Their Legal Relationships

The issue presented in this case is of enormous importance and is worthy of this Court's review. The decision of the Supreme Court of Alabama leaves adoptive parents and children in a state of considerable uncertainty, eviscerating the stability of out-of-state adoption judgments that the Full Faith and

Credit Clause is supposed to guarantee. In disregarding what this Court has taught about the meaning and importance of full faith and credit, the Alabama court's decision leaves children in the lurch, unsettling the most foundational relationships in their lives.

"[C]hoices to enter into and maintain certain intimate human relationships must be secured against undue intrusion by the State." *Roberts v. U.S. Jaycees*, 468 U.S. 609, 617-18 (1984). "Family relationships" are foremost among those demanding protection, because they, "by their nature, involve deep attachments and commitments to the necessarily few other individuals with whom one shares not only a special community of thoughts, experiences, and beliefs but also distinctively personal aspects of one's life." *Id.* at 619-20. The Constitution, therefore, guarantees family relationships "a substantial measure of sanctuary from unjustified interference by the State." *Id.* at 618.

The Alabama Supreme Court's decision upends one of the most important familial relationships, that between mother and child. Although S. L., N. L., and H. L. have known V. L. as their mother since birth, and although that relationship was granted formal legal protection by the state of Georgia (and, indeed, even though each child's birth certificate lists V. L. as a parent), the State of Alabama now declares that the children's adoptive mother is not and never was more than a legal stranger to them. The risk of harm to these children, as well as to others who may find

themselves in this position for reasons having nothing to do with their best interests, is intolerable.

What is more, the Alabama court's refusal to recognize final Georgia second-parent adoption judgments means that the parents and children in this case are subject to conflicting judgments by different state courts. V. L.'s adoption decree has never been challenged in Georgia, nor could it be, as explained below. It thus remains valid there, notwithstanding the Alabama court's decision. Consequently, whether a legal relationship exists between V. L. and her children depends on where the children are physically located at the time. While the children now have no legal relationship with V. L. in Alabama, if the children were to cross into the neighboring State of Georgia (or any other State, for that matter), V. L. will become the children's legal mother, notwithstanding the Alabama Supreme Court's ruling that V. L. is a stranger to the children. And V. L. would return to stranger status if the children returned to Alabama. The fact that these children are subject to conflicting state judgments about who their parents are warrants review from this Court. *See Webb v. Webb*, 451 U.S. 493, 494 (1981) (granting certiorari to resolve full-faith-and-credit issue "because the state courts of Florida and Georgia have reached conflicting results in assigning custody of the child").

The children in this case are far from alone in this state of extraordinary uncertainty. As a result of the Alabama court's decision, children throughout

Alabama who were adopted by a second parent in Georgia are subject to the same rigid dichotomy. V. L. and E. L. are hardly alone in having obtained a second-parent adoption in a State, such as Georgia, in which the legal merits of such adoptions had not been conclusively established. Indeed, it has been well known for several years that some Georgia family courts would grant second-parent-adoption petitions. *See* Leslie M. Fenton & Ann Fenton, *The Changing Landscape of Second-Parent Adoptions*, ABA Section of Litigation (Oct. 25, 2011), http://bit.ly/1Qb8rD9 (listing Georgia as among the States in which "numerous trial courts have approved second-parent adoptions but no binding precedent exists"); *see also Bates*, 730 S.E.2d at 483 (discussing second-parent adoption granted in 2007 by the Superior Court of Fulton County, Georgia).[2]

The decision's reach is not even limited to families who reside in Alabama. Current Georgia residents who obtained second-parent adoptions there are also in danger of their family relationships' being

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[2] The Supreme Court of Georgia has not conclusively determined whether Georgia law provides for second-parent adoptions. Whether Georgia's adoption statutes expressly provide for second-parent adoptions is not necessarily determinative. In many States, the availability of second-parent adoptions has been recognized through court rulings rather than statute. *See* Fenton & Fenton, *supra*. For present purposes, all that matters is that the Georgia Superior Court had subject-matter jurisdiction to issue adoption decrees and granted V. L. an adoption judgment, and that Georgia courts would recognize and enforce that judgment.

legally null and void when they enter into Alabama. Moreover, the Alabama Supreme Court's rationale would extend to adoption judgments from other States in which second-parent adoptions have been openly granted without any clear statutory or precedential guidance providing for them. *See* Fenton & Fenton, *supra* (listing eleven such States, apart from Georgia).

And no principled distinction would limit the Alabama Supreme Court's rationale from extending to *any* state adoption decree that an Alabama court deems faulty. Indeed, *every* out-of-state adoption is at risk of being declared "void" by Alabama courts in a collateral attack, simply by a showing that a statutory requirement was not followed to a T, even years after the adoption was finalized.

This concern can arise in a multitude of different scenarios and is not limited to situations where, as here, the relationship between the biological parent and the adoptive parent ends. Under the Alabama Supreme Court's decision, a child who lives with a biological parent and an adoptive parent who are in an ongoing relationship would be treated as an orphan if the biological parent were to die or become incapacitated. Because the child's adoptive parent is a legal stranger to that child, the child could be removed from the custody of his or her only remaining parent at a critical time of grief and crisis, when the child most needs that parent. Similarly, while out-of-state families are visiting or traveling through Alabama, they are subject to the risk that if anything were to

happen to the biological parent, the adoptive parent would be legally powerless to help the children during the crisis or thereafter. The Alabama court's decision also may affect numerous other areas that should not be issues for adoptive parents and their children—including medical decision making, schooling, inheritance, and Social Security benefits.

This untenable risk of harm to families is more than enough to justify this Court's intervention.

B. The Alabama Supreme Court's Decision Cannot Be Reconciled With This Court's Full-Faith-And-Credit Jurisprudence

The Alabama Supreme Court's decision is completely unfaithful to this Court's precedents directing States to give full faith and credit to foreign judgments.

1. The Full Faith and Credit Clause permits only a narrow inquiry into the jurisdiction of the court that issued the judgment

The Constitution demands that "[f]ull faith and credit shall be given in each state to the public acts, records, and judicial proceedings of every other state." U.S. Const. art. IV, § 1; *see also* 28 U.S.C. § 1738. Under that clause, a judgment in one State's court commands the same preclusive effect in other States' courts that it would enjoy in the issuing State. *Underwriters Nat'l Assur. Co. v. N.C. Life & Acc. & Health Ins. Guar. Ass'n*, 455 U.S. 691, 702 (1982). That command "is exacting." *Baker ex rel. Thomas v.*

Gen. Motors Corp., 522 U.S. 222, 223 (1998). "A final judgment in one State, if rendered by a court with adjudicatory authority over the subject matter and persons governed by the judgment, qualifies for recognition throughout the land." *Ibid.* The Constitution accordingly precludes courts in one State, presented with a judgment from another, from "any inquiry into the merits of the cause of action, the logic or consistency of the decision, or the validity of the legal principles on which the judgment is based." *Milliken v. Meyer*, 311 U.S. 457, 462 (1940).

In determining the appropriate recognition that an out-of-state judgment commands, courts may "inquire into the jurisdictional basis of the foreign court's decree." *Underwriters Nat'l Assur.*, 455 U.S. at 705. "[A] judgment of a court in one State is conclusive upon the merits in a court in another State only if the court in the first State had power to pass on the merits—had jurisdiction, that is, to render the judgment." *Id.* at 704. But the "scope of review one court may conduct to determine whether a foreign court had jurisdiction to render a challenged judgment" is "limited." *Id.* at 706. The reviewing court is limited to determining the judgment's preclusive effect *in the rendering State*. *See id.* at 704 & n.10; *Marrese v. Am. Acad. of Orthopaedic Surgeons*, 470 U.S. 373, 380 (1985) (holding that full faith and credit "commands a federal court to accept the rules chosen by the State from which the judgment is taken," rather than "employ their own rules of res judicata" (quotation marks and citation omitted)). That means,

for example, state courts must give res judicata effect to another State's court's conclusion that it had jurisdiction over the parties and subject matter, where that issue was fully and fairly considered and finally decided in the court that issued the original judgment. *Underwriters Nat'l Assur.*, 455 U.S. at 706; *Durfee v. Duke*, 375 U.S. 106, 111 (1963).

2. *Rather than conduct a narrow jurisdictional review, the Alabama Supreme Court effectively conducted a full-fledged inquiry into the Georgia judgment's merits*

While the Alabama Supreme Court recited and claimed to apply the proper standard, it did so "in name only." *See Maryland v. Kulbicki*, 136 S. Ct. 2, 3 (2015) (per curiam). The Alabama court failed to properly limit its review of the Georgia court's judgment, as required by the Full Faith and Credit Clause, and instead conducted a *de novo* review of the merits of V. L.'s adoption petition in a collateral attack on the Georgia judgment.

A statute directed to jurisdiction is one that "goes to the power" of the court, whereas a statute directed to the merits goes "only to the duty of the court." *Fauntleroy v. Lum*, 210 U.S. 230, 235 (1908). Accordingly, the Alabama Supreme Court should have focused its inquiry on whether the Georgia Superior Court had the *power* to issue adoption judgments.

Had it done so, it could have concluded only that the Georgia Superior Court had subject-matter jurisdiction over the adoption proceeding. There is no question that Georgia superior courts have the *power* to issue adoption decrees. Superior courts are Georgia's trial-level courts of general jurisdiction. Ga. Const. art. VI, § 1, ¶ 1. Georgia law vests those courts with "exclusive jurisdiction in all matters of adoption." Ga. Code Ann. § 19-8-2. Indeed, the Alabama Supreme Court rightly recognized that "Georgia superior courts like the Georgia court have subject-matter jurisdiction over, that is, the *power* to rule on, adoption petitions." Pet. App. 19a (emphasis added).

That should have been the end of the question. As the Supreme Court of Georgia recently explained, "[t]he phrase jurisdiction of the subject matter refers to subject matter alone, i.e., conferring jurisdiction in specified *kinds of cases*. It is the power to deal with the *general abstract question*, to hear the particular facts in *any case* relating to this question." *Crutchfield v. Lawson*, 754 S.E.2d 50, 52 (Ga. 2014) (quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis added); *see also Abushmais*, 652 S.E.2d at 550 ("Jurisdiction of the subject matter does not mean simply jurisdiction of the particular case then occupying the attention of the court, but jurisdiction of the class of cases to which that particular case belongs." (quoting *Hopkins v. Hopkins*, 229 S.E.2d 751, 752 (Ga. 1976))).

Rather than properly confining its inquiry into the Georgia Court's power, the Alabama Supreme Court answered a different question: whether, when presented with a petition for a second-parent adoption, the Georgia Court had the *duty* under Georgia law to deny it. That is, under the guise of determining subject-matter jurisdiction, the Alabama court instead litigated the *merits* question whether Georgia law provides for second-parent adoptions. The court *de novo* conducted its "own analysis of the Georgia adoption statutes" and decided that those statutes do not provide "for a non-spouse to adopt a child without first terminating the parental rights of the current parents." Pet. App. 22a. If full faith and credit permitted such an inquiry into the statutory requirements for the original judgment, all manner of out-of-state judgments could be challenged in collateral attacks. *See Riley v. N.Y. Trust Co.*, 315 U.S. 343, 349 (1942) (Without full faith and credit, "adversaries could wage again their legal battles whenever they met in other jurisdictions. Each state could control its own courts but itself could not project the effect of its decisions beyond its own boundaries.").

Contrary to the Alabama Supreme Court's reasoning, when a Georgia superior court issues an order or judgment that does not comply with all statutory requirements, such defect goes to the merits, not to the court's subject-matter jurisdiction over the matter. For example, in *Mosley v. Lancaster*, the appellant contended that a Georgia superior court lacked subject-matter jurisdiction to deny probate of a will

without impaneling a jury, relying on a statute providing that "a jury must be empaneled" in cases "touching the probate of wills." 770 S.E.2d 873, 876 (Ga. 2015) (quoting Ga. Code Ann. § 15-6-8(4)(E)). Rejecting that argument, the Supreme Court of Georgia explained that the Georgia Constitution "establishes the superior courts as courts of general jurisdiction" and that a statute "grants superior courts jurisdiction to review the judgments of probate courts, including those touching on the probate of wills." *Id.* at 877 Notwithstanding that no jury was empaneled, the Georgia superior court still had subject-matter jurisdiction because it "had jurisdiction of the 'class of cases' to which this case belongs." *Ibid.* (quoting *Crutchfield*, 754 S.E.2d at 52); *see also Zeagler v. Zeagler*, 15 S.E.2d 478, 480 (Ga. 1941) ("the jurisdiction of a court in no way depends on the sufficiency or insufficiency of the pleadings").

Nor is there any indication in the statutory provisions that the Georgia legislature intended to abrogate the *power* of Georgia superior courts to issue adoption decrees whenever the statutory requirements are not met precisely. The text and structure of Section 19-8-18 strongly suggest the contrary. For one thing, the statute provides: "If the court determines that any petitioner has not complied with this chapter, it may dismiss the petition for adoption without prejudice *or it may continue the case*." Ga. Code Ann. § 19-8-18 (emphasis added). Authorizing a court to continue the case is the opposite of depriving the court of jurisdiction. In addition, the statute

contains other requirements for issuing adoption decrees that cannot be jurisdictional. For example, it provides that "[i]f the court is not satisfied that the adoption is in the best interests of the child, it shall deny the petition." *Ibid.* It would be passing strange to suggest that a court's subject-matter jurisdiction turns on whether it is "satisfied" that its decision is in a child's best interests. That is a quintessential merits question.

When the Alabama Supreme Court's decision does refer to Georgia law, it points to authorities discussing merits questions, not jurisdictional ones. The Alabama Supreme Court pointed to the principle under Georgia law that "[t]he requirements of Georgia's adoptions statutes are mandatory and must be strictly construed in favor of the natural parents." Pet. App. 23a-24a (quoting *Marks*, 684 S.E.2d at 367). But that is a rule of interpretation of the merits of whether an adoption should be granted, *see Marks*, 684 S.E.2d at 367, not a rule about jurisdiction.

The court also quoted at length from an opinion by Justice Carley of the Supreme Court of Georgia, dissenting from denial of certiorari review in a case in which the lower Georgia court had refused to set aside a second-parent adoption. Pet. App. 20a-22a (quoting *Wheeler v. Wheeler*, 642 S.E.2d 103, 104 (Ga. 2007) (Carley, J., dissenting from denial of certiorari)). Justice Carley argued in dissent that Georgia statutes do not provide for adoption of a child who has a living parent unless that "parent's rights are surrendered, or are terminated." Pet. App. 20a. Such

an adoption, according to Justice Carley, was defective because the adoptive parent "did not have any valid claim for adoption." *Wheeler*, 642 S.E.2d at 104. The Alabama Supreme Court "echo[ed] the conclusion of Justice Carley * * * that Georgia law makes no provision for a non-spouse to adopt a child without first terminating the parental rights of the current parents." Pet. App. 22a. But, again, that is a conclusion about the *merits* of second-parent adoption in Georgia. *See Murphy v. Murphy*, 430 S.E.2d 749, 751 (Ga. 1993). Indeed, Justice Carley never said that his analysis was jurisdictional.

3. The Alabama Supreme Court should not have second-guessed the Georgia judgment because Georgia courts would enforce it

Likewise, the Alabama Supreme Court's decision gives short shrift to the preclusive effect Georgia courts would give V. L.'s adoption judgment. Georgia courts would give full effect to the adoption judgment, and the Alabama courts are bound to do so as well. *See Underwriters Nat'l Assur.*, 455 U.S. at 702.

First, by statute, Georgia explicitly prohibits any challenge—even a jurisdictional challenge—to the Georgia adoption here. Under Section 19-8-18(e) of the Georgia Code, "[a] decree of adoption issued pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section shall not be subject to *any* judicial challenge filed more than six months after the date of entry of such decree." Ga. Code Ann. § 19-8-18(e) (emphasis added).

Georgia courts regularly enforce that prohibition, concluding that it proscribes collateral attacks on adoption judgments, even attacks on the issuing court's jurisdiction. *Williams*, 717 S.E.2d at 553-54; *see Rimmer v. Tinch*, 749 S.E.2d 236, 239 (Ga. Ct. App. 2013) (holding that § 19-8-18(e) barred consideration of whether adoption judgment was void); *Oni v. Oni*, 746 S.E.2d 641, 643 (Ga. Ct. App. 2013) (holding that "§ 19-8-18(e) brooks no exception" and barring a challenge based on fraud to an adoption decree brought ten months after its entry).

This adoption-specific statute of repose reflects Georgia's policy choice to effectuate "the compelling public interest in the finality and certainty of judgments, an interest that is especially compelling with respect to judgments affecting familial relations." *Bates*, 730 S.E.2d at 483 (citation omitted). Other States have made similar policy choices, based on the unique interest in finality of adoption decrees. *See, e.g.*, Ala. Code § 26-10A-25(d); *S.J.L.S. v. T.L.S.*, 265 S.W.3d 804 (Ky. Ct. App. 2008); 2 Ann M. Haralambie, *Handling Child Custody, Abuse and Adoption Cases* § 14:28, n.1, Westlaw (database updated Dec. 2015) (collecting statutes).

The Alabama Supreme Court interpreted this statute of repose to mean that Georgia "*would* permit a challenge on jurisdictional grounds to an adoption decree that did not fully comply with § 19-8-18(b)." Pet. App. 17a. The Alabama court ruled that if an adoption did not comply strictly with the requirements of Section 19-8-18(b), the adoption was not

issued "pursuant to subsection (b)," and therefore the statute of repose has no effect. Pet. App. 15a-17a. But Section 19-8-18(b) is the sole statutory provision for granting an adoption in Georgia. The Alabama Supreme Court's interpretation would therefore allow a complete end-run around the adoption-specific statute of repose: any adoption could be challenged at any time on the ground that it did not comply strictly with Section 19-8-18(b). That narrow reading wholly disregards the policy choices that the Georgia legislature made in enacting the provision, and it ignores the way that Georgia courts have applied the statute of repose. *See Bates*, 730 S.E.2d at 483. The Full Faith and Credit Clause allows States to make such choices and have them respected by other States. Moreover, the Alabama court's only authority for its conclusion was a dissenting opinion in a case in which the Georgia Supreme Court refused to review, and thus allowed to stand, a trial court judgment barring a collateral attack based on that same reasoning. Pet. App. 16a-17a (quoting *Wheeler*, 642 S.E.2d at 105 (Carley, J., dissenting)).

Second, Georgia courts would not have entertained E. L.'s challenge to the Georgia superior court's jurisdiction because of E. L.'s own actions in affirmatively seeking the adoption judgment and because of the delay in challenging the adoption.

Under Georgia law, because of the compelling need for finality and stability in family matters, a party such as E. L. who participated in prior litigation cannot later challenge the judgment, even if the

original court lacked jurisdiction to issue the decree. For example, in *Amerson v. Vandiver*, the Georgia Supreme Court held that where a party "affirmatively invoked the jurisdiction of the superior court for the purpose of obtaining a divorce, consented to that court's incorporation of the settlement agreement [terminating his parental rights], and then failed to file a motion to set aside for four years," the party could not challenge the superior court's jurisdiction to terminate his parental rights. 673 S.E.2d 850, 851 (Ga. 2009); *see also Bennett v. State*, 494 S.E.2d 330, 331 (Ga. 1998) (State could not collaterally attack new trial judgment where "State urged the trial court to grant a new trial," "thanked the trial court for its actions," and "did not appeal from the judgment" or otherwise seek review for five years).

Here, E. L., together with V. L., affirmatively invoked the jurisdiction of the Georgia Superior Court for the purpose of obtaining an adoption decree. Pet. App. 11a. E. L. filed her own "parental consent to adoption" stating that she consented to V. L.'s adopting the children and that she wanted the adoption to "have the legal result that [V. L.] and [the children] will also have a legal parent-child relationship with legal rights and responsibilities equal to mine." Pet. App. 3a. And she failed to challenge the jurisdiction of the Georgia court to issue that decree for more than six years. In these circumstances, Georgia law plainly prohibits E. L. from collaterally attacking the very judgment that she originally sought. *Amerson*, 673 S.E.2d at 851. The Full Faith and Credit Clause

demands that Alabama give the adoption judgment the same preclusive effect. *Underwriters Nat'l Assur.*, 455 U.S. at 702; *see Coe v. Coe*, 334 U.S. 378, 384 (1948) (where "both parties were given full opportunity to contest the jurisdictional issues" and the judgment is "not susceptible to collateral attack in the courts of the State in which it was rendered * * * the requirements of full faith and credit preclude the courts of a sister State from subjecting such a decree to collateral attack").

Third, the Alabama Supreme Court never should have considered whether the Georgia court could issue a second-parent adoption decree because the Georgia Superior Court already dealt with that very question. The Georgia court expressly considered the import of the fact that it was being asked simultaneously to preserve E. L.'s parental rights and also to grant parental rights to V. L. The court concluded that the adoption could proceed nonetheless. The Georgia court ordered that "the parent-child relationship between the legal mother, [E. L.], and the children *is hereby preserved intact* and that [V. L.] shall be recognized as the second parent." Pet. App. 51a (emphasis added). The court so ordered because it found that it "would be contrary to the children's best interest and would adversely impact their right to care, support and inheritance and would adversely affect their sense of security and well-being to either deny this adoption by the second parent *or to terminate the rights of the legal and biological mother.*" Pet. App. 50a (emphasis added). The court also

concluded that V. L. had "complied with all relevant and applicable formalities regarding the Petition for Adoption in accordance with the laws of the State of Georgia." *Ibid.*

The Georgia court's unchallenged decision that it could issue the adoption decree should have been the last word. Under well-established rules of finality, the Alabama courts were precluded from inquiring into the Georgia court's authority. *See Treinies v. Sunshine Mining Co.*, 308 U.S. 66, 78 (1939) ("The principles of res judicata apply to questions of jurisdiction as well as to other issues, as well to jurisdiction of the subject matter as of the parties." (quotation marks and footnote omitted)); *see also Coe*, 334 U.S. at 384.

C. This Case Is An Ideal Vehicle

Finally, no vehicle issues exist that might possibly preclude the Court from deciding the important question of federal law presented. The question concerning when a state court may deny recognition to a judgment issued by a sister State's court based on purported lack of subject-matter jurisdiction is starkly presented here. No issue exists with respect to the Georgia court's personal jurisdiction over the parties. As the Alabama Supreme Court recognized, "E.L. and V.L. willingly appeared with the children before the Georgia court, so personal jurisdiction is

not disputed." Pet. App. 11a. If the Alabama Supreme Court misapplied this Court's full-faith-and-credit precedents (it did), then V. L.'s adoption judgment must be recognized.

Accordingly, the Guardian Ad Litem urges the Court to grant the petition and restore a measure of familial stability for the children at issue here, as well for the untold numbers of other families potentially affected by the Alabama Supreme Court's decision.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above and in the petition for a writ of certiorari, the petition should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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